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Written on October 8, 2015 at 6:00 am by [svanderwerff](#)

Exercising to Relieve Stress

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According to some studies, one vigorous exercise session can help alleviate stress symptoms for hours, and a regular schedule may significantly reduce them over time.

The physical benefits of exercise have long been established. Exercise is known to improve physical fitness, help manage weight, and reduce stress. The most recent federal guidelines for adults by the

Department of Health and Human Services recommend at least 2½ hours of moderate-intensity physical activity (e.g. brisk walking) each week, 1¼ hours of a vigorous-intensity activity (such as jogging or swimming laps), or a combination of the two. (<http://health.gov/paguidelines/guidelines/>)

According to some studies, one vigorous exercise session can help alleviate stress symptoms for hours, and a regular schedule may significantly reduce them over time. Exercise has some direct stress-relieving benefits. Hormonally, physical activity helps to increase the production of endorphins. Endorphins are your brain's feel-good neurotransmitters. Physical activities may require you to concentrate on that particular task for completion which in turns alleviates you from thinking about the stressor. Exercise, particularly vigorous exercise, helps to fatigue you which can counter sleeplessness.

The Mayo Clinic offers these tips to put exercise and stress relief to work for you. A successful exercise program begins with a few simple steps.

- Consult with your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.
- Build up your fitness level gradually. Excitement about a new program can lead to overdoing it and possibly even injury.
- Virtually any form of exercise or movement can increase your fitness level while decreasing your stress. The most important thing is to pick an activity that you enjoy.
- Schedule it. Although your schedule may necessitate a morning workout one day and an evening activity the next, carving out some time to move every day helps you make your exercise program an ongoing priority.
- Set goals. Write down SMART goals — specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-limited goals.
- Find a friend. Knowing that someone is waiting for you to show up at the gym or the park can be a powerful incentive. Working out with a friend, co-worker or family member often brings a new level of motivation and commitment to your workouts.
- Change up your routine. Changing your routine will help alleviate boredom with your routine and has the added benefit of cross-training.
- Exercise in increments because even brief bouts of activity offer benefits. For instance, if you can't fit in one 30-minute walk, try three 10-minute walks instead. Interval training, which entails brief (60 to 90 seconds) bursts of intense activity at almost full effort, is being shown to be a safe, effective and efficient way of gaining many of the benefits of longer duration exercise.

What is most important in improving your health and reducing stress is making regular physical activity part of your routine. Any form of physical activity can help you unwind and become an important part of your approach to easing stress. The key is sticking with it.

Additional information can be found at: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/exercise-and-stress/art-20044469>